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Nigeria: Worth Doing (1992)

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VI. NIGERIA

I spent a week at home and returned Tuesday, April 7, to London. British Airways needed passengers on its Concorde and gave me an upgrade at no extra charge. It took three hours and 45 minutes to fly across the Atlantic from Dulles to Heathrow, reaching speeds of twice the speed of sound at 57,000 feet. It took one hour to get through Heathrow, one hour plus waiting for the Speedlink transit bus, and one hour in a bus ride from Heathrow to the overnight hotel at Gatwick. Such are the limits of transport.

The next morning, in a pharmacy at Gatwick Airport, I purchased some Paludrine tablets, which are not for sale in the U.S., to ward off a strain of malaria that the USDA-approved Chloraquin tablets can't touch. I took these pills for two weeks and quit because they made me sick. I kept up the weekly Chloraquin tabs. In going to Africa, you take this kind of precaution. On the earlier crossing, I ran into a manager with Mobil's marketing unit in Africa who told me how concerned Mobil ex-pats were about the wife of a Canadian employee of Mobil Producing Nigeria in Lagos who had died earlier in the month of cerebral malaria. She was among the many who did not take Chloraquin regularly and who, when she became ill, turned down a Nigerian doctor's recommendation that she immediately begin taking Chloroquin intravenously to aggressively combat the bug. She fell ill on Saturday and was dead on Tuesday.

My flight from London landed at Murtala Mohammed Ikeja Airport in Lagos at 7:50 p.m. Wednesday. At the airport, experience taught me to get out of the cabin quickly and get as close to first in line at the passport control and customs as possible. Actual lines at passport windows do not exist. Entrants to Nigeria of all nationalities crowd around the booth. You are forced to hold

your passport above people's heads and hope the person behind the window takes it, stamps it with little fuss and returns it to you. All the while, variously uniformed Nigerians are taking passports from people behind in line and handing them ahead of you. To an American citizen who believes his passport is a precious lifeline in a dangerous world, seeing it loose in this sea of treachery quickens the breath and can cause one to awaken during nightmares in a start.

As I was leaving the aircraft and stepping into the darkened gangway anticipating this welcome, in my haste, I bumped into a rotund Nigerian who was going just a bit too slow. I excused myself and saw that it was Solomon Oluduni, the senior Nigerian employee at Mobil Producing Nigeria, a vice president and director of the company and a very nice guy. We chatted as we made our way through the airport. I was among the first at the passport window, and the two officers processed my visa with a minimum of fuss. As I moved to the next stop only one woman asked to see my passport. This was too remarkable.

On previous trips to Lagos, it had taken up to two hours to pass muster with the various armed thugs who stand in your path. Lagos is not a modern place. The city and its various official functioning departments, agencies and authorities are each run by one or another tribe, subtribe or clan. The purpose of every one of the 200 or so family or kin groups is not efficiency or productivity. It is to gather and maintain power.

After the end of the slave trade in the 19th century until about 1960, Nigeria was a dominion of the British Empire, which forged the country together by merging three main tribal provincial areas into one political unit. This was skillfully if not wisely done by the simple technique of divide and conquer. By manipulating the historic and deep antagonisms between the tribes, Britain saw to it that none could dominate the confederation, and the colonial borders established in 1960 have been Nigeria's curse ever since.

Nigeria remains, at root, a chaos of tribal cultures loose inside a European-style federal state. Nigeria has a population of about 90 million, half Muslim and half Christian. Books have been written about the consequences of European colonial rule. In Nigeria, it was the British who must accept history's judgment. It is up to the Nigerians of today to make sense of it.

The nature of tribal culture in Nigeria is that the tribes are in constant competition with each other and consequently everyone in authority argues with everyone else in authority for the purpose of gaining ever so marginal an advantage. The result is that Nigerians treat each other like dog meat. The Lagos airport, Nigeria's link with the world, is therefore more like a kennel for starving dogs. No fewer than 14 different agencies, departments and police authorities have some say in how the airport is run. Each has its own

gang of people, many armed and all with arrest authority, who mill about the place to exercise their power, which includes jockeying to dominate each other while also asking visitors for bribes. Despite the fact that visitors feel they are the prey in this game, you learn that visitors are simply the pawns in the Nigerian pasttime of one tribe member trying to get the better of another tribe's member.

I saw Solomon at the baggage carousel. He understood how all this looked to me. He was sympathetic and wished me luck.

"Once you get through, Francis is here for you," he said, knowing my schedule. The routine was that Francis Ugbomah, a Mobil employee, would make sure I was transported from the airport to the staff quarters. Getting out of the airport was the trick.

At the customs desk, the inspector appeared bored. I was among the first and thus too early to bother with. More fish would come shortly. I walked past him, getting only one question about whether I had anything to declare. No, just clothes and papers. Once through the doorway I saw Tom Iyamu, my colleague, and Francis Ugbomah, Mobil's airport processing facilitator, behind the barrier. Seeing people get through the gauntlet of passport, customs officers and police, at Lagos airport is exhilarating. I went over to them directly and we had a friendly greeting. We were all overjoyed I had made it so quickly and so easily.

I was obliged to go through the official doorway, and there stood two armed young men in Air Force uniforms—teenagers, actually—who refused to let me out. Finally, I thought to myself; it had all been too easy. Now came the trouble. They had questions: Who are you? Who are those men (Nigerians Iyamu and Ugbomah)? Do you know them? Do you live here? How often do you come here? These two were serious. This was not good. Iyamu and Francis had made their way around the back and, within moments, I was no longer the prey. Iyamu and Francis served the same function performed by the rodeo clowns who dash in front of the bucking bulls to distract them away from the cowboys. I was obliged to step back as the Nigerians began a process that was to determine who had more power than the other and who was in charge. This was now a nightmare. I stood silently, with my bags on my shoulder as the armed airmen refused to let me go and who were now threatening to jail Iyamu. His original offense, remember, was to be friendly to an obviously non-Nigerian visitor.

Within a few moments the airmen were forced to recognize Iyamu's journalists' guild ID, which he carried as a licensed PR man and journalist for precisely this purpose. The ID meant Iyamu had the power to expose. The airmen now realized the game had changed. At that point they chose to recognize the obvious: I was an American oil guy with a travel-anytime-for-a-year visa, that I was obviously working, and that Iyamu and I were colleagues who

were happy to see each other and not drug smugglers, and that Iyamu and Francis were not rip-off artists in the airport preying on unsuspecting tourists.

As he looked at our papers to learn our identities, one airman quietly asked Iyamu, "Am I embarrassing you?" He wrote down our names: Tom I & Tom C. "You have the same name," he said, as if this couldn't be so.

"We are related," Iyamu joked, "he is my brother." The airman wasn't sure this was funny. This was a young man of limited understanding. The situation was now de-escalating, and the young airman was realizing he had lost this little skirmish in the countless such conflicts that fill a Nigerian's day. What remained was to save face, which was accomplished in moments as he asked simple questions that required simple responses.

Iyamu later said the airman told him why he had stopped me. "The government is trying to encourage tourists, and there are many thieves at the airport who steal from visitors," Iyamu explained later. "He thought he was protecting you."



Nigeria today in 1992 was a federal republic whose government was run by a general and dictator named Ibrahim Babangida. He came to power in 1985 after leading a successful coup against an elected president who had allowed his tribe and other retainers to steal too much too often from too many. Babangida was slowly allowing democratic rule back by building civilian governments at the state level. There were today 30 states in Nigeria, which each had their own elected civilian governments, and were roughly divided along tribal, geographical or historic lines.

People took Babangida seriously. This was a man who had a lifelong friend from his home village, through his military academy and army career and who kept him close as a friend and confidant in the military government after he took over. One day Babangida heard rumors that his friend might want to seize power for himself. Babangida had his friend arrested, court-martialed and shot.

Nigeria is a sad place. It is named for the River Niger, which runs through the country and empties into a wide, rich delta in the Atlantic Ocean. The people's beginnings were no different from any other place in the world. The people and their communities were adapted to their surroundings, which in Nigeria's case is coastal tropical swamp and jungles in the south, along a series of lush rivers stretching north to the drier plains bordering the Sahara.

The evidence of ancient tribal culture is still very visible on many Nigerians. It is common to see tribal facial scars on both men and women in Nigeria. Some are deep and plainly visible, say, three lines sloping at angles across the cheek, or chin scars. The number of scars, angle, length and width varies, and such tribal scars describe tribes, villages or families. It was used to

permanently bind a tribal member to the group, though it had the added benefit for warriors who used the scars to tell each other apart. Scarring is less common today. Members of modern Nigerian society today frown on the ancient practice. There is an effort in the newspapers and at social gatherings to urge families not to mark their children.

Iyamu explained, "It is difficult for many Nigerians when they travel. People in other countries see the scars and ask what happened. 'Did you have an accident or get caught in a knife fight?' This embarrasses people and makes them believe they have something to be ashamed of."

These visible marks of group identity may be slowly disappearing, but tribal loyalty has not. There are three main tribes in Nigeria. The Hausa, who tend to be Muslim and who reside in the north, which is dry and desert like. This is where Babangida is from. I haven't had much experience with Hausa because the company's operations are in the south offshore so we deal with the people in the other two main tribes of the south. In Lagos, the nation's former capital and home to up to 10 million, and in the south and west are the Yoruba kingdoms, which include the people of Benin, among the most sophisticated and artistic. Benin art tends to be bronze and is beautifully sculpted and widely distributed as the best examples of Nigerian art. Their culture is rich and is still dominated by the Oba, or Obes, who are the tribal leaders and who border on being kingly deities. Iyamu is a Prince of Benin, which is home to about a million. Iyamu spent a decade in his 20s in London in school and working as a journalist and many months in the U.S. working with Mobil. He is a cosmopolitan person and knows the limits of tribal culture. "I'm a prince," he explains, "but don't call me that."

Of course, Tom Iyamu was one of the people of Benin, who along with many other area tribes haven't been as able to withstand the power of the Yorubas, who dominate the area around Lagos in the south and west. The Yorubas have a traditional alliance with the Hausa, which enables these tribes to dominate Nigeria. The Yorubas are aggressive, voluble, passionate, and florid in all things; they like things bigger than life. They are entrepreneurial and independent. Where the tribal dress of Benin includes not much more than a waist cloth, and a bare chest covered with only a necklace, the Yorubas wear embroidered shirts and pants covered by a tent-like outer garment which is so bilious a Yoruba dominates a social gathering with cloth and expanse. The men wear matching "boiler pot" hats, and the women wear matching head dresses that are like huge bow ties of brightly colored material. Yorubas have wonderful passionate personalities.

The third main tribal group comes from the old Kingdoms of Calabar, which are to the south and east, near the Niger Delta. This confederation of tribes include the Ibo of Imo and Anambra States, and the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State where Mobil's operations are located. There are other sub-

tribes such as the Oron near Cross River State on the Cameroon border, and the Annang, Ibeno and Akwa Ibom, whose tribal names are now the names of cities and states.

These people are commonly known in the western world as the Ibo, who were the dominant tribe in the confederation of rebels who tried to separate from Nigeria and create Biafra, causing what Nigerians call their civil war. It ended about 20 years ago and is still part of the living memory of all adults. This war was a horror for the Ibo tribal allies, costing at least a million lives, mostly civilians isolated by federal armies and starved into submission.

It is the Ibo, Ibibio, Ibeno, Annang, Oron and other peoples of this region who have had the longest contact with Europeans. The Portuguese, Dutch and British all established camps and trading posts in Calabar in the 16th century and from these bases more than 2.5 million Africans were sold, stolen or otherwise kidnapped into slavery for the Americas. When African-Americans come to search their roots, many find their origins in Calabar, Eket and the villages of the Nigerian/Cameroon border areas.

The facts of history prevent any student from getting unbalanced about the slave trade being uniquely directed toward Africans. Ancient Greeks and Romans, the creators of modern civilization, had slaves. Indians in North America, for example, had slaves. One report calculated that by 1400 AD, Arabs conducted slave trade operations throughout West Africa, including northern Nigeria where the Hausa resided, and who today remain adherents to the Muslim faith. The Arab slave traders brought back up to four million slaves from Africa for the Middle East. In Europe, Christians could not enslave other Christians, but they could hold slaves from the pagan Eastern European territories. Indeed, the word for slave in Italian, German, Spanish, French and English was derived in the 12th century from the word "slav." So when Europeans got into the slave business in Africa it wasn't new to them or to Africa. It's just they were the last, and slavery's evil consequences remain part of daily life in America.

The Ibo and Ibibio and other subtribes of this region are, compared with the Yoruba, more steady, less passionate, more calculating and straightforward. They are independent thinkers and consider Yoruba and Hausa as "others." If they have an opinion that differs from a Yoruba, say, an Ibibio feels perfectly confident that he is right and the Yoruba a stuffed shirt windbag who only likes to hear himself talk. Yet the Ibibio is also prepared to believe he can create his own country and ignore the fact his opponents have more people, guns, money and other resources to win a war that would cost the Ibibio, Ibo and their fellow tribesman a million lives. They are people who do not quit; the kind who can withstand the worst an enemy can dish out and survive, which in fact African-Americans have done. These are a people that any American would be proud to call kin.



Iyamu and I flew from Lagos to Eket, about 250 miles east toward the border with Cameroon. Eket is the main town in Akwa Ibom State, the political jurisdiction in which Mobil has its offshore operations and where the main oil and gas processing and storage terminal is located at Qua Iboe. This is the home turf of the Ibibio people.

Iyamu and I met Dayo Ojo, a Yoruba tribesman whom we hired last fall to work for Iyamu. He is a well-educated and experienced journalist who worked for a time in public relations for one of Nigeria's largest banks. He quit because the bank was corrupt. For the past six weeks he had been doing the community affairs work at Qua Iboe Terminal as part of a training and orientation assignment. He is smart, aggressive and very likable. Much of this job is knowing and establishing relations with the three dozen chiefs and so-called "traditional leaders" of this area so that there are no conflicts with the community that would impede oil production.

For my visit, he had a tour all set. Our first stop was Uyo, the capital of Akwa Ibom State, where it turns out the newly elected civilian governor Abiong Isemin is building a palace for himself. The former governor, an Air Force wing commander named Nkanga, said Akwa Ibom State was the Land of Promise. It is the new governor's 100th day in office and a wide banner hung over the main street saying: "Making the Land of Promise into the Land of Fulfillment." Such is Nigerian politics, as everywhere.

Along the road throughout Akwa Ibom State were village roadblocks for the purpose of taking tolls from commercial vehicles. The guards wore differing uniforms, were armed, and stopped traffic by using a combination of empty oil drums and planks laid across the roadway in which long rusty spikes were nailed and stuck upward to puncture any tire. We passed through unharmed.

There was a gasoline shortage in this section of Nigeria that would eventually have grave consequences in Lagos. A first-year student in economics could see why. The federal government, supposedly to keep people happy, controlled the price of gasoline at an artificially low level. Across the border in Cameroon (a French speaking country just 25 miles from Akwa Ibom State) the gas price was much higher. The obvious result was what we saw in evidence everywhere: unmarked rust-covered tank trucks, loaded with black market gasoline, on their the way out of Nigeria to Cameroon. The dealers and gasoline distributors in Nigeria were simply taking their allocations from the state petroleum company and shipping it out of the country to get the higher price, resulting in shortages at home. Customs officials along the street stopped the trucks and were paid bribes to look the other way, which they all did.

Near the town of Oron, we saw one man seated in a Peugeot stopped at

curbside talking to two customs guards on the outskirts of town. As the tank truck came from the east, the driver waved his arm out of the window as a signal for the truck to continue and not stop. The tank truck barreled through the customs check easy as you please. Ojo said another tanker would be behind him and do the same thing, which it did. It seemed tank trucks travel in pairs for safety because of bandits and hijacking. We also saw vans and trucks jammed with plastic-wrapped goods, which Ojo said were covering smuggled goods that would be brought either to or from Cameroon for untaxed black market sale. All this was being done under the eyes of armed and uniformed municipal police and state customs officials. No one in Akwa Ibom complained too loudly to Lagos that the low prices were creating shortages, or about the smuggling. If Lagos heard about the smuggling, officials there would simply demand their cut of the action. Corruption ensured that everybody made money. The resulting problem, however, was that the people didn't have enough gasoline in Akwa Ibom along the border.

Weeks later in Lagos, the problems caused by the gasoline shortages, transportation fare increases, corruption and economic chaos erupted in violence. Anti-government mobs, mostly students, looted stores, burned gas stations and overturned cars in a spontaneous riot in a working class neighborhood called Oshodi. More than a dozen people were shot and killed by the police over two days as roving gangs of protesters set tires on fire in the streets, and exchanged gunfire with police. Just a week before, 10 people were killed when commuters, angered by rises of 400 percent for public transport, clashed with police.

Nigeria was producing 1.75 million barrels of oil a day, but the economy was a wreck. Corruption was rampant. After the oil price went up following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the price increase was calculated to bring in \$3 billion in additional revenue to Nigeria for the oil exported during that period. London bankers, lenders and bondholders were only able to find \$1 billion in Nigerian accounts. Where did the other \$2 billion go? Private Swiss accounts of prominent Nigerians? This and other economic distortions and corruptions caused the government recently to devalue the Nigerian currency, the naira, by 43 percent, forcing even more Nigerians into poverty.

To stop hoarding and cross border smuggling, President Babangida ordered special border patrols at all service stations within 25 kilometers of the frontier borders in Chad, Cameroon, Benin and Niger. Government armed forces also escorted tankers from oil terminals to stations to make sure they got there without being hijacked.

Because he sensed he was losing some support in the Army, Babangida also created a new security force, a kind of personal national guard, to keep order. In addition to the economic rioting in Lagos, the northern sections of the country have had religious riots between Christians and Muslims, which

have cost an estimated 750 lives. However, Babangida pledged that presidential elections would be held in December and that the country would return to civilian rule early next year. We'll see.



In Oron, we stopped at the Akwa Ibom State Museum which Mobil supports. A young lady (in a voice so soft and so heavily accented she was virtually impossible to understand) escorted us around, showing me centuries-old wooden effigies of dead villagers, carved in their last weeks of life to hold their spirit after death and be treated with reverence by family and tribe forever. They were now carefully propped up in the museum, and listed by which village they came from in Akwa Ibom State. In addition, we saw the costumes of what Americans would call witch doctors, Epke (Lion), and Ju Ju, who are the oral interpreters of ancient and divine rules and behavior during ritual dances, much like a priest would interpret Scripture.

Ojo made sure the young woman brought us down to a Civil War cement pillbox on the bank overlooking the Cross River. It was left intact from the Biafra rebellion of 23 years ago, to remind all of this area's historic realities.

Oil wealth was one of the realities. Before the Biafra rebellion, Mobil was among the companies that had discovered what would be a fortune in oil offshore the area of Nigeria the Ibibio tribesman (primarily Ibo) felt was theirs. The Ibibio and Ibo knew that Nigeria was only a remnant of an English colony and not an organic African creation. They did not consider themselves hostage to the Yorubas and Hausas of northern and western Nigeria. Yet the Nigerian feds were more ruthless, controlled sea, air and overland food trade avenues, and starved the rebellion into submission. The pill box overlooking the Cross River remained as a relic.

We stooped over and crawled inside. There was a cast iron painted soldier, standing permanent sentry duty as if frozen from history. Outside the narrow horizontal portal was a nearly perfect vista of the Cross River below and its approach to Oron, a population center for some 200,000 Oron tribesmen. It was an utterly beautiful spot, with green tropical trees overlooking white sandy beaches and riverfront and a winding slow waterway leading to the Atlantic. Here were invasions, counterattacks and combat for months in 1969 in which tens of thousands died.



That evening, the Nigerian national television showed images of President Babangida meeting that day with South Africa's President Frederik de Klerk in Abuja, which had become Nigerian's capital just the year before. It was the first time that any black African leader had met with a leader of South Africa, and was an historic milestone in African political affairs. South Africa was breaking

out of its shell, and Nigeria was assuming the role of power broker on behalf of Africa. The symbolic meeting also highlighted the fact that Nigeria was evolving from military rule to democracy while South Africa was evolving from a racist dictatorship to a non-racial democratic society. As the television showed de Klerk and Babangida exchanging formal handshakes and the guns erupted into a 21-gun salute, I saw Ojo and Iyamu talking to each other.

“This de Klerk is a strong man,” said Ojo. “I admire this man.”

“We can do business with him,” added Iyamu.

This is just what resource-rich Nigeria needs from industrialized South Africa. Could these countries lead Africa in the decades ahead into competing on the world stage? Dreams and hopes live.



The next day I visited Qua Iboe Terminal, where Mobil’s offshore producing facilities are based. The undersea wells and production platforms are 30 miles out to sea, and the crude is transported by pipeline to shore for treatment, separation and holding in huge storage tanks for shipment by pipeline back offshore to barge loading moorings at sea.

I had last been there in November 1991, when Mobil’s chairman and Nigeria’s president held a joint dedication of the new \$900 million Oso condensate project, and the opening of the Edop producing field. The protocols for the Mobil chairman and Nigerian president were easier than dealing with the 200 “traditional leaders” from Akwa Ibom, each of whom demanded equal treatment and courtesies, which in Nigeria is jokingly summed up in the phrase said before any public address to a group: “All protocols observed.” Nigerians are hierarchical by tribal culture, anyway. On top of this is the British model, which puts a premium on nobility, rank and class. For Nigerians the British legacy has been like putting a spark to gasoline. The protocols of the ceremony had haunted Mobil’s producing managers for more than a year, though everything came off fine. No one was burned.

Phil Webster, the plant operations manager, took us in an old VW van for a ride around the plant. I was eager to see the Oso tanks taking shape, but Webster was proudest of the new manifold and oil/gas/water separator where 300,000 barrels a day come through. Mobil makes \$2 to \$3 a barrel profit in a processing fee for each and every barrel, every day. The various offshore production projects (Edop, Oso, Iyak) should increase those production figures to 500,000 barrels a day by 1995. At the operations level (pre-tax and pre-corporate charges), that’s \$1 million to \$1.5 million profit a day, up to \$400 million a year, shy of the \$600 million level from Indonesia. Together these two countries accounting for nearly half of Mobil’s earnings. With these circumstances, my job is to make sure that “all protocols are observed.”

The terminal, by visual comparison, was a modest looking place for such

wealth production. All Mobil's effort was directed toward that manifold and those numbers the manifold makes possible. Mobil is a publicly traded company on the New York Stock Exchange, with ownership bought and sold every day. Few folks know it, but more than 11 percent of that stock is held by the various pension funds of government employees around the U.S. Banks, insurance companies and other institutional investors own 50 percent, and employees through their savings and pensions own about 8 percent. That investment in Mobil's future was right there in that manifold; all stock market action, pensions, employee salaries, international politics, financing, VIP visits, news releases, ads, Nigerian political interactions, community relations projects, school construction, health clinics, roads, everything; The entire economic structure rests on simple manifolds like this in a very few places in the world, of which this was one of the most important.

"Worth doing," said Webster with a smile.



Ojo took us on a tour of the various projects Mobil has supported in the Eket LGA (local government area). Throughout the area, so much of the construction by others was half started and abandoned. The bricks stacked by the work site were overgrown with thick green moss and black mold. One road was built from one town to Eket in such a way that it passed by the home village of Air Force Wing Commander Nkanga, who had been governor for less than two years. Along the side of this road the former government was now building a huge home.

Over the years, Mobil has built and donated to the area a jetty and boat dock along the Qua Iboe River, a transportation center where the people have set up a market for fish and produce. The market that day was lively. Classroom buildings for a secondary school built by Mobil were simple poured cement floors, cinder block walls, a tile roof, and wide open window areas. Near the school were homes for teachers. Motto: "That We May Grow."

At the Apostolic Church High School in Esit-Urua Mobil built a science lab of the same construction. The school had more than 300 students, and the classrooms nearby that day seemed full. The hard-working 30-year-old principal explained that his school graduates 50 students every year and that about 10 will go on to university in Uyo or elsewhere, on Mobil scholarships.

In Idung-Iniang we walked through the Motherless Babies Center where up to 100 orphans can be cared for. Five miles away we drove to Mpkok Primary School where 250 elementary students, clad in white shirts and blue shorts or dresses, swarmed around the Mobil car, looking at me and my three Nigerian colleagues. We slowed down, and I was struck by the number of little children who now converged around the car to look inside. I waved and

they smiled. As the driver slowly guided the car out of the schoolyard, the children began running alongside. I took off my sunglasses and waved, and blew kisses. The children, now laughing and running right next to the car in fun, waving and blowing kisses in return, displayed such open and pure joy even a stone would weep.



During our drive Ojo mentioned that Eket, a town of about 200,000 on the Qua Iboe River, was originally settled as a slave trade center.

“When the Europeans came here,” Ojo explained, “the tribes in this area were at war all the time. There were many prisoners of war, and many were slaves already. Those are the people who were first sold to the Portuguese or Dutch or English. Then, because the trade was good, the local chiefs conducted hunts, and people from the weaker tribes were taken from the interior and sold.”

During this conversation, Ojo’s tone and manner was that of a slave seller, identifying with owners explaining that slavery was a way of life. Ojo, as a Yoruba, is a member of the tribe that with the Hausa of the north, dominate Nigeria today. Yorubas look up at no one.

The Nigerians have an odd relationship to the notion of slavery. On the one hand, as members in the modern world, they know there is prejudice against their African kinsmen in America. Aside from their sympathy for black Americans as human beings, and common scorn against any who are prejudiced against Africans, Nigerians have no conception of themselves being second-class citizens, and would not identify with slaves, wherever they came from. Nigerians know that the Africans in America, after all, got there because they are descendants of losers in some ancient tribal war.

Prominent in the leadership of the Mobil company in Lagos, for example, is a chief of a Lagos tribe named Badi ‘Ojoura. Badi is a lawyer, and wears suits and shirts tailored in London, ample gold jewelry and the finest French colognes. He issues orders to his staff and is known not to work himself. The ‘Ojouras are one the six tribal families of Lagos whose senior members rotate leadership of Yorubas in Lagos. The ‘Ojouras trace their prominence and vast wealth, as landowners in the most populous African city, to the 17th and 18th century slave trade, when the ‘Ojouras captured their enemies and sold them to Europeans.



In the guest quarters Mobil maintains on Cooper Road in Ikoyi Island in Lagos, there is a squad of stewards who run the place. They prepare the food, clean the place and do laundry, and act as part of the security. They are employed by a contractor from Akwa Ibom State, who hires men and women

from that area to come to Lagos for two weeks on and one week off.

When I arrived a young man with copper colored skin brought out the guest book for me to sign. Nothing is done in the compound that isn't signed for. This way the contractor controls pilfering and proves to Mobil that he is billing the company properly.

The young man who held out the book had a closely shaved head. If someone would call me a somewhat fleshy lumbering lion, you would call this slender and lean young man a cheetah. When he looked at my signature he said:

“Collins is your name.”

“That's right.”

“That's my name, too,” he said.

How was this possible, I thought. “Collins is an Irish name,” I said, laughing. “Are you Irish?”

“No,” he said, not sure of my humor. “Collins name comes from Imo State.”

An Ibo tribesman, I realized. We chatted a bit and he paid particular attention to me afterward, and was friendly and attentive. We treated each other respectfully and carefully, each wondering how we both could have the name Collins. He considered his name Ibo, not Irish, and I knew the name had other origins.

Being named Collins in Ireland is a normal thing, the name being the seventh most common. It meant that your clan was the O'Coileain from western Ireland, counties Cork or Clare. The O'Coileain (pronounced O Quill Awn) were either forced or persuaded to adopt an English version of the name after one of the many ancient English/Irish conflicts. Collins in England derives from the Old English word coll, which means hill.

While in Eket I asked Ojo and Iyamu how an Ibo could get the name Collins. They considered the situation. After a bit of conversation we believe we came up with a plausible explanation. Ojo explained that as the slave trade was ending and many were gaining freedom, many Africans found their way home.

“Many Ibo, Ibibio and Oron and Akwa Ibom people came back,” Ojo explained, “after all those taken near the end of slavery remembered their homes villages or heard from relatives about it and knew where to come. Liberia (west of Nigeria) was founded by former slaves.”

I told them about a large plantation on the South Carolina coast owned by a planter named Collins. He was English and had come to the Carolinas in the 18th century. The Africans he enslaved built one of the most prosperous plantations in the colonies. The plantation owner's slaves numbered in the hundreds and many, over time, took the name Collins. Today they are organized into a family association, which meets from time to time and is

such a prosperous group their story is told on the network news, which is how I learned about it.

“There are many people here who have names that come from America,” Iyamu said. “This Ibo at the staff house in Lagos may have an ancestor who returned from America to his home village in Imo state years ago. He just doesn’t know it.”



On Friday night at Le Mirage Restaurant in the Federal Place Hotel, Victoria Island, I went to a dinner in honor of Mobil’s retiring general manager, Alfred Koster, a German national who was being given the title of Honorary Fellow by the Nigerian Environmental Society. The affair was wonderfully Nigerian: overblown, friendly and familiar, complete with florid rhetoric in praise of the retiring Mobil manager.

I saw Madeline, Alfred’s wife, who like her husband had lived in Nigeria for a total of 10 years but had not liked it at all. He was retiring early because she was suffering migraine headaches often now and she was concerned about being away from her mother, who was ill in Germany.

When she saw me, a familiar face, she joked: “Are you living in Lagos now?”

The people seated across from me included a Nigerian businesswoman whose father was British, and a Welsh woman and Nigerian man who were husband and wife. He was a brother of a former governor of Akwa Ibom State, and very distinguished in appearance and bearing. He had no difficulty or hesitation in dissecting trade policy about the number of foreign parts in American auto imports, the British exchange rate problem with Germany, or real estate prices in London. This was a man of with a large bank account and who easily wrote a check donating \$2,000 to the Society before he left. His wife and the Nigerian/British woman across from me discussed the British election. They were certain that the reason that John Major won was that there was no way the British would elect Kinnock, a Welshman, as prime minister.



The next morning a colleague named Kayode Awosanya picked me up for a tour of Lagos. His driver commanded the car we would need to see the National Museum of Lagos, the National Theater, and the National Gallery of Modern Art, where the company has supported exhibits and other events. One is careful not to take the wheel in Nigeria. A favored crime is carjacking, which involves armed bandits approaching the driver’s side, opening the front door, shooting the driver and, as the gunman drags the driver’s body from the front seat, he allows passengers to get out unharmed. Most of the time.

Kayode went first to National Museum, where a short young man with a thick accent gave us a guided tour. He walked us through the stages of Nigerian images from Yoruba, Hausa, Benin, and the Ibibio tribes near the Rivers states toward Cameroon.

In the modern art section, there was a display of Nigeria's various uniformed gang leaders since independence in the 1960s. One general after another, some leaving peacefully, others murdered, exiled or thrown into jail. A place of reverence is held for the black limo of Murtala Mohammed, in which he was assassinated in 1975. The myth woven about him was that he was murdered for trying to reform the government to one based on merit and efficiency. His reign lasted six months. Today his memory is displayed as an icon of sacrifice to the forces of anti-corruption. Hope wanes.

The National Theater is a completely dreadful edifice. It is as big as the Houston Astrodome but ill kempt, dirty, and a haven for idlers. The building is situated on a low wet section of land that has a fetid, moist aroma. Inside, we found the director seated in a small office behind a closed door reading the newspaper and saying the government must pay for more. The building is operated by the Ministry of Information and Culture. Obviously its budget was being cut, not expanded.

In the open rooms where hundreds would gather for a stage show, film or concert, tattered rugs and wall coverings were moldy and rotting. Dried filth covered the floor. The air was stale. The building was built for air conditioning, but none had been on in weeks. These rooms were torture chambers.

Despite these horrors, we were led to a section upstairs and off the front near the windows where a collection of contemporary Nigerian art was displayed in the National Gallery. Some was quite dramatic and moving.

That day, the gallery area had been leased by a fashion institute, which was holding a graduation ceremony for perhaps 50 young women. These girls were dressed in western style clothing and with modern makeup and hairdos. Like a junior college assembly, this was a moment of achievement these young beauty school graduates were sharing with their families. Despite the fact that they were gathered in this awful modern structure abandoned by all but those in attendance, it was a moment of achievement and pride.

Kayode and I watched the ceremony from a balcony as the people gathered and diplomas and achievements were awarded. The music in the background was African and loud, and there was no question where American pop music got its origins.

During the ceremony, we walked to a different section, and found ourselves right in the middle of a collection of 20 young women in western dress preparing to go onstage. Suddenly, as we walked through this group, six of the girls separated from the others and began a dance in unison. Now they were led by an older woman who stood in front and conducted their moves as a

visual choreographer. The girls were bent at the waist, slightly accentuating their behinds, and their shoulders and their arms were carried high in unison and moving like wings of a bird.

The music they were dancing to heavy drumbeats and guitars and flutes and could have been part of a rock 'n roll set in Detroit. The girls, seeing us watching, began to smile. They were now performing. Then they gathered only to themselves, smiling, dancing in a rhythmic cadence of steps and body motion; choreographed by their leader. This was bewitching; a magic moment of joy.

I asked Kayode to explain. He said that they were practicing for their performance. It was a Yoruba tribal dance.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “I can recognize it. The motions are very familiar. In fact, I can tell you by the sound and dance what part of Lagos they are from. It is where my wife is from.”



While in Nigeria, always in the back of your mind is the gauntlet you will be required to endure in order to leave. Getting through the airport to the plane was my last challenge in Lagos and posed the same hazards as upon arrival. Again, because I was early, I avoided the worst. My only challenges were posed by two women in uniform. One was the woman who held my airplane ticket and passport as I paid the 50 niara airport tax departure fee at one booth before the final customs check, and the other woman was the one who took the tax fee receipt just before boarding. Both held my papers, looked me in the eye and used the grafter's phrase of art.

“What do you have for me?”

All that was required to get the papers returned was a vacant stare, a refusal to play the game.



Weeks after I got home I received a letter from Collins Onyirimba. In a fine educated script, he wrote that he hoped my trip out of the country was smooth, but something was on his mind.

Since you left the Penthouse it has seemed to me like a part of me has gone out because I have been in that Penthouse for over two years but haven't seen anybody that has the same name with me till you came and the way you took to me made me feel like being around you always...things are very hard in Nigeria and going to the States has been my ultimate desire and now that I have known you it has added more to my struggle to get out of the hard country of ours... Sir, in any way you can help me please do it without looking back for I would not forget you in my life.

Months later on another trip to Nigeria in December, I told this story to Alfred Koster, the retired general manager of the Nigerian affiliate. We were seated in one of the homes in the management compound in Eket about 10 miles from Qua Iboe. We had both returned to Eket for the dedication ceremony of the new \$1 billion offshore condensate production facility named Oso. Alfred had retired a few months before and returned to his native Germany. He had been invited to take part in the dedication ceremonies as a mark of respect for his role in creating a project that would earn Nigeria more than \$11 billion over 25 years.

“This is harsh, but stay away,” Alfred said quickly. “This is the only way.”

Alfred said that on several occasions he had become involved in the personal matters of various Nigerians. It had turned to heartache. In one case the son of a trusted employee received a long jail sentence in Texas for drug trafficking. The boy had succumbed to the temptation of easy money with other Nigerians while in Houston. Alfred said that helping his employee’s son go to the States had ruined lives.

In Nigerian culture, if a person seeks a favor from someone in authority and the assistance is given, the relationship of chief and tribesman takes over. Thereafter, the person in authority assumed the role of chief, the benevolent giver of favors and protection, while the tribesman maintained loyalty and devotion while continuing to request new favors from the chief. Few Westerners understand the implications of such pleas for help.

“This is a sad lesson,” Alfred said.

I asked what he thought about the origin of the Collins name in Nigeria. He allowed the story about the Collins plantation was possible. But he preferred another option.

“A sailor,” he joked. “Many sailors come into the rivers and stay for a time. This fellow’s family could have come from the States, but his father or grandfather could also be a sailor named Collins who stayed with a Nigerian woman years ago. Who can know?”

Alfred and I left the house for the five-minute walk to the social center where lunch was going to be served. Outside, more than 40 members of a uniformed security detail employed by Mobil were patrolling the compound. They wore the dark-green uniforms and black berets favored by Nigerian security services, full police belts and military regalia, and were armed, either with a semi-automatic rifle or Uzi-style machine gun.

A uniformed guard, holding a grease gun slung from his shoulder with both hands, watched us vacantly. His face had tribal scars and his expression displayed serious purpose. Earlier I had sat in the back seat of a car and one of these guards had stood absently a foot from my window with the barrel of his grease gun pointed at my face.

After we passed this guard on our walk, I said to Alfred: "Indian Country."

Alfred had lived for years in the States, and had been a resident of Westport, Connecticut, at one point. He knew America's Western Frontier stories and smiled at my reference.

"I don't feel safe with all these guns," he said.

We both knew the security force was there for a reason, and would be a condition of life for a while. The senior Nigerian manager for Mobil in Eket has been shot in the head and critically wounded some weeks before by assassins waiting in ambush on the Qua Iboe Terminal road a few miles away. The victim, named Shuaibu Otori, was 43 years old and had worked for Mobil for nearly 20 years. He was a university graduate in engineering, possessed a good humor and had worked his way up the ranks to be named the 14th area operations manager in Eket, and the fourth Nigerian to hold the post. He had replaced Felix Edmonds, who had been transferred to Fairfax and who had told me of the shooting the day it occurred. Felix had been the real target of the killers.

"I know who it was," Felix said that day, "exactly."

Felix said there had been threats to Nigerians working in Eket for months, and Otori's shooting obviously was the result of months of tension.

"I know the dozen protesters," Felix said, "I know their names and where they live. They should be arrested, tortured and they would tell the story."

Felix knew how Nigerian police worked. What he had suggested was pretty much just what happened. The problem began some years before when the Nigerian government began insisting that employees of a contractor working with Mobil be placed on Mobil's permanent payroll. The contractor had 150 employees who performed a number of general labor tasks around operations in Eket. The government's goal was to create regular Mobil employees. The problem was that the contractors' 150 employees performed work that required only 75 people. Finally, after years of delay, Felix and the other Nigerian managers in Eket agreed to take on the workers, but on the condition they fill actual jobs that would be written to Mobil standards. As a result, only 75 people were offered jobs. The other 75 were told to take a walk.

This was trouble. At one point the employees who had feared they would lose their jobs hijacked a work bus. Security forces were called in and dispersed the protesters from the front gate and got the bus back. No one was hurt, but the problem simmered for months. There were threats to Felix and the other Nigerian managers whom the workers suspected as being in charge of deciding who would stay and who would go. Felix said that Otori was among those targeted. Besides, because Otori came from another section of Nigeria and was a member of a tribe that was a traditional minority within

Nigerian culture, he was the most vulnerable to attack.

“By shooting Otori,” Felix explained, “they made sure they didn’t get any Yoruba or Ibo (from Eket) involved. He was the perfect target.” Otori was in the back of a car that was driving him from the management housing complex to the terminal office. At the site of the ambush, the gunmen fired into the tires, stopping the car, and then unloaded their clips in the back seat. The driver wasn’t hurt, and Otori miraculously survived. He was wounded in the torso and legs, with the most severe wound to his head. One bullet shattered his left jaw and palate. He was now in London in a hospital beginning a long period of reconstruction and recovery.

Later that day at the Oso commissioning ceremonies, President Babangida referred to the local violence:

While government remains genuinely sympathetic to community grievances and will continue to listen to complaints, it will not condone disruptive activities that harm our vital interests and paint our country black in the eyes of the world. Hostile activities by host communities, no matter how genuine their underlying grievances, pose a serious threat to investment.

On the plane trip back to Lagos, I took out the local newspapers. I had heard that the police were about to make some arrests. On page 2 of a newspaper called *The Punch*, a story appeared under the headline “Police arrest 7 over shooting of Mobil Manager.” The local police commissioner said three of the masterminds of the shooting were former Mobil employees who were “bent on avenging their retrenchment from company.”

The newspaper explained how the three hired four assassins from Essien Udim, another part of the country, and paid them 3,000 naira (\$150) to do the job. The shooters first set themselves up in front of an abandoned Coca-Cola warehouse along the road near the hospital, but they called it off after they heard the police had learned of their plan and were patrolling the area. They made good the shooting in an ambush a few weeks later, near an abandoned steel mill on the Qua Ibo Terminal road Mobil had build just last year. The newspaper identified the leader of the gunmen as a retired army colonel named Collins Timothy Afangide.